

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 SAA-01 SSM-03 SES-02 HA-05
AID-05 EB-08 OMB-01 TRSE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02
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P 191117Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9289
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 04805

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1,4
TAGS: PEPR, SY, US
SUBJECT: HOUSE ACTION ON SYRIAN AID

REF: DAMASCUS 6533

1. SUMMARY: THE HOUSE ACTION AGAINST US AID TO SYRIA IS
SEEN BY SOME HERE AS PART OF PROGRAM TO FORCE SYRIAN
ACQUIESCENCE IN SADAT INITIATIVE IN ADDITION TO BEING A
SLAP IN THE FACE OF SYRIA'S NATIONAL PRIDE. IT IS ALSO
SEEN AS UNDERCUTTING PRESIDENT ASSAD'S LONG-TERM POLICY OF
OPENING SYRIA UP TO THE WEST. WHILE SOME DAMAGE HAS
ALREADY BEEN DONE IT CAN LARGELY BE REPAIRED BY RESTORATION
OF THE FULL PROGRAM IN CONFERENCE. A PARTIAL RESTORATION
WILL STILL BE SEEN AS A PUNITIVE CUTBACK AND WHILE THIS MAY
NOT LEAD ASSAD TO RETALIATE AGAINST US NEITHER WILL IT PUT
HIM IN A MOOD TO CONTINUE TO BE RESPONSIVE ON ISSUES OF
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INTEREST TO US SUCH AS JEWISH EMIGRATION. WHATEVER THE
OUTCOME, ASSAD'S POLICES IN LEBANON AND TOWARD THE PEACE
PROCESS ARE BASED ON SELF-INTEREST AND WILL NOT BE AFFECTED.
IN THE LONG RUN, HOWEVER, ANY SYMBOLIC LOOSENING OF TIES
WILL PROBABLY MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO CONTINUE TO BUILD
A COMMUNITY OF INTERESTS WITH ASSAD. END SUMMARY.

2. THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ACTION ON SYRIAN AID CONTINUES TO RANKLE AMONG TOP OFFICIAL HERE. SOME SYRIAN LEADERS, WITH A TENDENCY TOWARD PARANOIA AND DISBELIEF IN COINCIDENCES, MAY HAVE CONVINCED THEMSELVES THAT SYRIA'S PROBLEMS IN LEBANON, WHICH APPEAR TO THEM INSPIRED BY ISRAEL, THE AID CUTOFF AND THE CAMP DAVID TALKS ARE ALL ELEMENTS OF A MASTER US PLAN TO PRESS SYRIA INTO JOINING SADAT'S INITIATIVE. THIS AT LEAST IS THE LINE THE PRESS TOOK AUGUST 18 AS IT CHARGED THE US WITH EXERTING POLITICAL (CAMP DAVID), MILITARY (LEBANON), AND ECONOMIC (HOUSE ACTION) PRESSURE ON SYRIA TO WEAKEN HER RESISTANCE.

3. KEY SYRIAN OFFICIALS DON'T SUFFER FROM A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE HOUSE ACTION. THE SYRIAN EMBASSY IN WASHINGTON HAS BEEN SENDING DETAILED CABLES OF THE HOUSE DEBATES AND CONGRESSIONAL PROCEDURES. IN READING SOME OF THESE CABLE TO US, MFA AMERICAN DIVISION DIRECTOR SIAGE STRESSED LINKAGE SOME CONGRESSMEN MADE BETWEEN HOUSE ACTION AND SYRIAN REFUSAL TO JOIN SADAT INITIATIVE. SIAGE COMMENTED THAT QUICKEST WAY TO GUARANTEE STIFFER SYRIAN INTRANSIGENCE IN PEACE PROCESS AND IN LEBANON IS TO BRING US PRESSURE TO BEAR THROUGH AID CUTOFF. SIAGE WAS ECHOING FONMIN KHADDAM'S AUGUST 16 PUBLIC STATEMENT THAT SYRIA WILL NEVER DISCUSS ANY TOPIC WITH ISRAEL WHILE BEING SUBJECTED TO PRESSURE.

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4. EFFECT OF HOUSE ACTION ON PRESIDENT ASSAD MAY GO DEEPER THAN WOUNDED NATIONAL PRIDE. FORMER ASSISTANT TO GENERAL KHOULI SAID HIS COLLEAGUES WHO STILL WORK IN PRESIDENCY UNDER KHOULI ARE SERIOUSLY WORRIED ABOUT IMPACT ON PRESIDENT'S POLICY OF SYRIAN OPENING TO THE WEST. PRESIDENT HAS HAD TO FIGHT WITHIN BAATH PARTY FOR EVERY SMALL STEP IN IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH US. SOURCE ADDED THAT SYRIA IS STILL TEETERING ON THE BRINK BETWEEN EXPANDED "DEMOCRACY," RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, A FREER ECONOMY, AND A FLEXIBLE FOREIGN POLICY ON THE ONE HAND AND A RETURN TO ITS FORMER REPRESSIVE SOCIALIST SOCIETY LINKED CLOSELY TO MOSCOW. SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE OVER PAST SEVEN YEARS, BUT PRESIDENT HAS HAD TO BASE HIS THRUST, WHICH VIOLATES BAATHIST IDEOLOGY, ON PROMISE OF BENEFITS WHICH WILL ACCRUE TO SYRIA. SOURCE CONCLUDED THAT IF US NOW TURNS ITS BACK, PRESIDENT WILL BE PROVEN WRONG. WHATEVER US MAY THINK ABOUT PRESIDENT'S AUTOCRATIC POWER, HE CANNOT PREVAIL AGAINST BOTH IDEOLOGY AND LOGIC.

5. SIMILAR REACTION HAS BEEN EXPRESSED BY MIDDLE-LEVEL OFFICIALS IN THE MINISTRY OF ELECTRICITY, THE DAMASCUS GOVERNORATE, AND THE WATER SUPPLY AUTHORITY. THE HOUSE

ACTION IS LEAVING A VERY BIG SCAR, THEY CLAIM. THEY ARE VERY DISTURBED AND SADDENED BY AN ACTION WHICH IS SOURING OUR RELATIONS WHICH THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE EXPANDED FURTHER. LOCAL BUSINESSMEN ON THE OTHER HAND ARE NOT PARTICULARLY CONCERNED ABOUT AN AID CUTOFF EXCEPT INsofar AS IT MIGHT HURT THEIR PROFITS.

6. THE PRESS HAS NOT MADE A MAJOR ISSUE OF THE HOUSE ACTION AFTER THE INITIAL REACTION. NEVERTHELESS, AN INTERVIEW WITH AMBASSADOR TO US KABBANI APPEARED AUGUST 12 IN WHICH HE POINTED OUT THAT: A) AID TO SYRIA IS INSIGNIFICANT IN COMPARISON TO ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS FOR ISRAEL AND EGYPT,

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B) MOST OF THE AID IS SPENT IN AMERICA, NOT SYRIA, C) SYRIA DID NOT REQUEST THE AID, AND D) DISBURSEMENTS HAVE BEEN SMALL. HE SAID THAT HOUSE ACTION REPRESENTS MISCONCEPTION ON PART OF SOME CONGRESSMEN THAT SYRIA WILL FORMULATE HER POLICY BASED ON MONETARY REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS. KABBANI SAID THAT CONGRESSMAN DERWINSKI HAS TRIED IN THE PAST TO CUT SYRIAN AID ON OTHER PRETEXTS. THIS IS NOT SURPRISING, HE CLAIMED, SINCE DERWINSKI'S BROTHER IS A MEMBER OF THE ISRAELI KNESSET (SIC). KABBANI PRAISED CONGRESSMEN OBEY, HAMILTON, AND WILSON, AND SENATORS JAVITS AND RIBICOFF FOR THEIR INDEPENDENCE. ARTICLE AUGUST 17 REITERATED VERBATIM

THE POINTS MADE BY AMBASSADOR KABBANI. ARTICLE WENT ON TO CLAIM THAT PURPOSE OF US AID IS TO WIELD POLITICAL INFLUENCE, ESTABLISH MILITARY POSITIONS, PRECLUDE ANTI-US ACTIONS, SELL US GOODS ABROAD, OPEN WAY FOR CAPITALISM, ETC.

7. EVEN THOUGH FINAL CONGRESSIONAL ACTION ON AID TO SYRIA
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HAS NOT YET BEEN TAKEN, SOME DAMAGE HAS ALREADY BEEN DONE. OPPONENTS OF THE US ARE SEIZING ON THE HOUSE ACTION TO BOLSTER THEIR ARGUMENTS IN SYRIAN POLICY COUNCILS WHILE OUR FRIENDS HAVE NEW DOUBTS ABOUT US. RESTORATION OF THE FULL AMOUNT OF AID IN CONFERENCE WOULD GO A LONG WAY TOWARD REPAIRING THIS DAMAGE BY DEMONSTRATING THE US ADMINISTRATION'S ABILITY TO IMPLEMENT ITS POLICY DECISIONS. WE ASSUME THAT FULL RESTORATION OF AID IS PROBABLY NOT IN THE CARDS AND CONSEQUENTLY WE WILL BE LEFT WITH THE IRRITANT OF A PUNITIVE CUTBACK. THIS MAY NOT LEAD ASSAD TO RETALIATE AGAINST US OR AGAINST OUR INTERESTS (E.G. BY RESTRICTING THE NOW SLOWLY EXPANDING FLOW OF EMBASSY CONTACTS WITH SYRIANS)--WHICH HE MIGHT BE INCLINED TO DO GIVEN A FULL CUTOFF OF AID--BUT ASSAD WILL NOT BE IN A MOOD TO HELP US EITHER. THIS COULD HURT IN AREAS LIKE JEWISH EMIGRATION.

8. WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT CONGRESSIONAL ACTION WILL AFFECT ASSAD'S POLICY IN LEBANON OR ON THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS ONE WAY OR THE OTHER AT PRESENT, ALTHOUGH IT WILL MAKE MY REPRESENTATIONS MORE DIFFICULT BY ERODING THE MINIMAL CREDIT WE NOW ENJOY. HE IS FOLLOWING A COURSE DESIGNED TO SERVE SYRIA'S NATIONAL INTERESTS AS HE PERCEIVES THEM. WHAT CONCERNS ME MORE, HOWEVER, IS THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THE US SYMBOLICALLY LOOSENING ITS TIES WITH SYRIA THROUGH PUNITIVE USE OF THE AID PROGRAM AND THE POSSIBILITY THAT THIS CAN ONLY MAKE ASSAD HARDER TO DEAL
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WITH AND HARDER TO CONVINCE THAT SYRIAN AND US INTERESTS ARE COMPATIBLE. SEELYE

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